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STANFIELD HALL.

By J. F. SMITH,

Author of "Minnigrey," "Woman and Her Master," &c.



Illustrated by Sir JOHN GILBERT, R.A.
AND OTHER EMINENT ARTISTS.

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[THE LOVERS SURPRISED.]

There was something so plausible in the manner as well as words of the speaker, that the unfortunate armourer fell into the snare. He had seen the envoy in close attendance upon Catherine, and it seemed the very madness of credulity to doubt him. Unhesitatingly, therefore, he entered into a barge to which the stranger pointed. It was rowed by four stout fellows in rich liveries, who pushed off the moment they had received their freight, and directed their oars towards a lofty turreted mansion on the opposite side of the river.

So unsuspicious was the young man of the intentions of his companion, that he followed him into the house; nor did the closing of the iron gates behind them, as soon as they had entered, in the slightest degree shake his confidence. Taking a torch from the hands of one of the numerous attendants in the hall, the noble host mounted a stone staircase, which led to the principal tower of the building, his victim following him. Nor was it till they had entered a low-arched, desolate-looking room, unfurnished, hung with tattered, antique arras, which floated with the night breeze from the walls, that the chill of suspicion struck upon his heart. Glancing uneasily round, he ventured to observe that it was a strange place to await the arrival of the queen's messenger in.

"It will suit our purpose," drily answered his conductor, at the same time removing his jewelled cap and casting it upon the dusty oaken table. "Few who enter here ever complain of the accommodation or reception."

The act of throwing off his cap at once revealed to Cuthbert the danger in which he stood, for the long dark plume which had hitherto shaded the left side of the wearer's face being removed, left distinctly visible a scar, such as a wound from a lance-head might have made. The young man remembered the words of his uncle, and felt that he was betrayed.

"Sir John de Corbey!" he exclaimed; "then I am lost."

"Thou knowest me, knave," said his captor. "'Tis well; it will save words between us, for I am of those who do not love to waste them. Where is the wanton who calls herself the widow of my kinsman?—where the bastard she would palm upon the world as Stanfield's heiress?"

"By what right do you interrogate me?" demanded the young man.

"The right which rules the world—force," replied Sir John.

He struck his hands together as he spoke, when three men immediately appeared from behind the arras; two were common-looking ruffians, who evidently had long been at war with humanity as well as fortune—Mercy would have turned from them with a hopeless eye, so strongly marked were the lines of avarice and cruelty upon their features. They were fellows who would have strangled the priest at the altar, or the smiling infant at its mother's

breast—strangled them for sport had the incentive of gold been wanting. The third was our old acquaintance in the mulberry-coloured gown and hood. Cuthbert had scarcely time to lay his hand upon his sword when the two former sprang upon him, and he was disarmed.

"Thou art a faithful messenger!" observed the last-mentioned personage, in his usual low, musical voice, whose tones fell fearfully upon the armourer's ear from the very absence of anger or of passion in it.

"Silence, good Adam," said Sir John; "we complain not of the treason, though we punish the traitor. Behold, young man," he continued, pointing to the lower end of the room; "tell me, what seest thou there?"

"A dark recess," answered Cuthbert, "left in the solid wall."

"What else?"

"A pile of brick and stone."

"Enough to fill the entrance to that recess, is't not?" demanded his questioner, with a cold smile.

"Enough to fill the entrance to that recess!" repeated the youth, with a faltering voice. "Mean you—no, no—God! 'tis too horrible for human malice to conceive, or nature to endure—you do not mean——"

"To what?" demanded his tormentor, with the same unmoved expression.

"Nothing," said Cuthbert, "nothing; one of those monstrous dreams such as scare children in their sleep, and old men cross their brows when they relate—a thought too wild for madness, too horrible for truth—a thought," he added, with increased excitement, "which hell would pause to listen to, if uttered in its centre, and laughing fiends approve."

"At last," exclaimed Sir John, "we understand each other. Mark well my words: name to me the retreat of those I seek, or, living, I'll immure thee in yon tomb. Thou shalt woo Death, and coyly he shall hear thee; hunger shall gnaw thee; burning thirst consume thee; the screech-owl only echo back thy shrieks, and hell and darkness mock at thy despair. Decide; time waits for both, eternity for one of us."

"Then Heaven have mercy on me," replied the armourer, firmly; "for I will not betray the trust reposed in me, or sell the blood of innocence."

At a sign from their employer the two ruffians sprang upon their prisoner, whom, after a desperate struggle, they dragged to the recess, and, despite his shrieks and frantic cry for aid, bound him by a chain fixed in the solid wall.

"Monsters!" said the youth, exhausted with the fearful efforts he had made, "Heaven will avenge me!"

"It had better save thee," observed Adam, with a sneer.

The men immediately commenced their labour ; and in a few minutes the enclosure reached as high as the breast of the victim.

"Stay !" he gasped, overcome with the terror and horror of his doom : "if I accede to your demand, what pledge have I that you will keep faith with me ?"

"My word, slave," uttered the knight, in the same calm voice.

"Or his oath, if thou canst trust it better," added his cynical companion in villainy.

"I can trust neither !" shrieked the youth ; "oaths are for men, not monsters. You would mock my simple faith—profit by my credulity. I must die," he added ; "but O God, such a death ! If you are human, show me some mercy—the sword, the cord, or axe, but not a doom like this."

"Proceed !" cried the villain, who saw that his crimes had left him no guarantee to offer on which the armourer could depend, and whose death now became necessary to his safety.

The men rapidly resumed their fearful work, impatient to end a scene which was appalling even to their ferocious natures.

"Monsters !" said Cuthbert, as the wall rose rapidly before him ; the Heaven whose laws you outrage will yet avenge me ; my restless spirit shall haunt ye to the scaffold ; my murdered form shall ever be beside you ; remorse shall palsy the unspoken prayer upon your lips. God !" he added, "be deaf to them as they are deaf to me ; harden their hearts ; deprive them of the power of penitence. Avenge me, if Thou wilt not save me. Mercy—darkness—darkness—darkness !"

The last brick was inserted in the wall, and the words of the still living tenant of the tomb sounded faintly from behind the arras, which the trembling executioners of their master's will let fall over their fiend-like butchery.

"You are pale," said Adam, going to an old cupboard and filling a goblet of wine, which he presented to the ruffians ; "this will refresh you."

"After you," said one of the men suspiciously, for the gentle Adam was held in dread and doubt by all who knew him.

"Fools !" replied the leech—for such was his profession—with a quiet smile, at the same time draining half the contents of the cup. "What is't ye fear ? Such instruments are too useful to be parted with ; our mutual guilt is a bond between us, as sure as death could make it."

Replenishing the cup, he presented it to the men, who drained it without suspicion. The next morning they were both found dead within their beds.

On descending, after the scene we have described, into the great hall, Adam and his master found a messenger with a summons from the council, commanding the attendance of Sir John de Corbey on the following morning before the king.

"I have lost the game!" exclaimed the assassin, pale with rage, to his worthy assistant, as soon as they had retired to the chamber of the former; "the estates for which I stained my hand in kindred blood are lost."

"But life is saved," replied the leech; "dead men can bear no evidence against us."

"And honour?"

"Pshaw!" added the cynic; "hast lived these years to grieve for a shadow? Honour! thou wilt grow moral next. Honour! it was thy inheritance; fools only grieve when they have spent it."

With this sneer the confederates parted.

On the following morning, Sir John de Corbey, attended by his minister and accomplice Adam, made his appearance in the presence-chamber, where a scene presented itself which might have shaken even his iron nerves, had he not been prepared to meet it. The widow whom his machinations had deprived of a husband and driven to the verge of madness, and the orphan whom he so long had plotted to rob of her inheritance, were kneeling before the throne where Henry and his queen, surrounded by their court, both sat. Wolsey was standing near the person of the monarch, listening to the story of her wrongs, and commenting upon it, as she proceeded, to his master.

"So, sir knight," exclaimed the impatient king, "you are come at last to answer for yourself. God wot, but we had nearly sent in other guise to fetch you. Knowest thou this lady?" he added sternly, pointing to the still kneeling suppliant before him.

"My noble kinsman, Richard of Stanfield's widow!" said the traitor, with well-acted affection and surprise; "this is indeed a joyful meeting. Why, noble lady, have my letters and my prayers for your return so long remained unanswered?"

"Letters!" faltered the widow; "I received none."

"Received none!" repeated the false guardian; "and the large sums of money sent to your orders?"

"Never reached me," said the lady. "I have been forced to sell plate, jewels, and all I possessed for bread."

"There hath been treachery here!" cried the knight, with so natural an appearance of indignation that all but Wolsey was deceived by it. He, with his usual astuteness, saw that the speaker was acting the only part prudence and safety left him.

"You admit, then," said Henry, in an undertone, "this lady to be the widow of your kinsman."

"Who dares to doubt it?" answered the artful villain, "or brand the unblemished honour of your old servant, Walter Mauny's daughter?"

The allusion to Henry's preserver was well timed, and confirmed the good impression his previous words created.

"And this his child?" added Wolsey, pointing to the infant,

whose deep, thoughtful eyes were fixed upon the party questioned, with an expression of intelligence beyond her years.

"His child and undoubted heiress," was the reply.

"You are prepared, then, to resign your trust?" continued his eminence.

"This very hour," said Sir John, sinking on his knee; "and I entreat my royal master to relieve me from it. I am poor—but hitherto my honour is unquestioned. Appoint what arbiters your grace shall please, and if they find a silver penny unaccounted for, a rood of land wrung from my kinsman's trust, I pledge my life to make the forfeit good."

"God's writ! but we have wronged the man," exclaimed Henry, starting from his seat; "thy speech is far more honest than thy look. My lord of York, see to it. Knavery must be skilled indeed if it blind thee. Lady," he added, kindly, "old Mauny's daughter shall not lack a friend whilst Henry lives. Embrace thy kinsman. It seems to our discernment both have been victims of the same deceit. Look to her safety, my lord cardinal, and follow to our closet."

With these words the impatient Henry, who hated business, and was anxious to depart for Greenwich, where his sister, Margaret of Scotland, was hourly expected to arrive, broke up the presence, and, followed by all but Wolsey, Sir John de Corbey, Adam, and the helpless widow and her child, withdrew from the apartment.

The murderer approached, and would have saluted the widow of his kinsman, but with an instinctive shudder she drew back. A serpent's kiss would have been more welcome to her.

Wolsey, not over-satisfied with the turn the affair had taken—for he trusted to involve the patron of Sir John, Warham the Chancellor, in the knight's disgrace—seeing the agony and repugnance of the lady, interfered, observing that when the accounts of his trust were audited and acquitted it would be full time to claim the kiss of peace. Turning to one of his officers, he gave orders for the departure of the widow and her child.

"Where to, your grace?" demanded the unabashed knight; "to Stanfield?"

"No," answered Wolsey, coldly; "to the convent of St. John."

Three days afterwards the suffering, broken-hearted victim slept the last sleep, and the orphan heiress of Stanfield was left the only bar between the assassin and the prize he sued for. But an eye was upon him, and, despite his daring, he quailed beneath its glare: that eye was Wolsey's.

CHAPTER II.

A tale of wonder, and of terror too,
Such as old men by chimney-nook relate,
When winter draws around some gossip's hearth
The listening awe-struck group.

THE Lady Mary, as the orphan heiress of Stanfield was generally named, remained for several years in the same retreat to which Wolsey had consigned her. So fair did the investigation of Sir John de Corbey's guardianship, which took place upon the death of her widowed mother, appear, that no reasonable motive could be assigned for depriving him of his trust, and he still remained in the management of her vast possessions. He was no vulgar gamester—the stake he played was for character as well as life; and every species of forgery and artifice were resorted to by himself and his agent, Adam, to account for the large sums appropriated to the furtherance of his schemes of ambition. Even in the blackest natures one trait will still be found, one link between humanity and Eden's forfeit heritage. Cold, subtle, and remorseless as was the heart of her false guardian, it was not for himself that he had sinned, but for his son, the impoverished heir of his proud name; doomed by his father's extravagance, crime, and folly, to that worst of fates—a noble beggar's. Henry de Corbey was two years younger than our heroine, a gallant noble boy, whose mind, nurtured by high thought and feeling, was free from every worldly stain, from every selfish passion; with him the beautiful in nature or in sentiment found a ready worshipper; his soul was framed for the ideal, and, like the sensitive plant, recoiled at all contact with the base and worldly. He was a youth such as the noble Surrey might have modelled, or the fair Geraldine have loved.

It was in vain that Adam, to whom his education was entrusted, sought to fashion him to his own dark purpose; no matter how artful the veil which hid the poison of his lessons, how specious the sophistry, his pupil rejected them, and, by a species of mental analysis, separated the good from evil. So sudden and startling were at times the intuitive perceptions of the scholar, that the atheist and cynic were tempted to exclaim, "Hath this thing a soul?" Opposite as were their characters, the guilty father proudly and passionately loved his son: in him every ambitious thought was centred, every future hope and wish; for him alone had he sinned, and the motive of his crime was made at last his punishment.

Sir John's communications with his ward during her residence in the convent were chiefly made through the medium of his secretary, a young man of decayed but noble family, named Walter Lucas. His father had been the knight's companion in the war in

Italy, had fallen fighting by his side, and he deemed his promise of providing for his orphan son amply fulfilled by appointing him to a station in his household. Young, ardent, and chivalrous, it is not to be wondered that the ripening beauty of the Lady Mary, now merging into womanhood, made an impression on his heart ; and that, although his lips were silent, his eyes were eloquent with thoughts of passion. Repeated interviews confirmed the dangerous feelings, and, despite the disparity of their fortunes, the madness of his hopes, the poor dependant loved. Mary became the star of his existence, the dream of his young life : if he sighed for honours, it was to raise him nearer to her sphere ; if he wished for wealth, it was to render him more worthy of her. Like some miser, he garnered the precious secret in his breast ; lived with it, prayed with it. She was the idol of his heart's shrine ; his very soul offered its incense to her.

The heiress possessed that peculiar style of beauty which Raffaele might have loved to paint, or Petrarch to immortalise ; the intellectual blended with the corporeal, the aerial with the earthly ; feeling and sentiment beamed from her dark blue eyes, which were so deep and clear in their expression that love and purity seemed to have made their homes there. Add to the portrait a nostril delicately chiselled ; a mouth formed like Cupid's bow, from which a breath exhaled sweet as the last fragrant air which Adam drew from Eden's half-closed gates ; and auburn hair falling in wavy masses, like a cloud of gold, over her neck and bosom. Imagine this, and you complete the picture.

Her step was grace ; her bosom's swell
Seemed like love's own gentle pillow—
A nest for young desire to dwell—
A sea of sweets—a snowy billow.

On the secretary's first visits, the orphan received him with a diffidence which soon gave way to smiles at the warm interest he expressed in all that could contribute to her happiness. How mistaken have those poets been who describe love as timid ! Those who really read the human heart will find that it makes weakness strong, and hath a courage peculiarly its own. On one occasion, while on his way to the convent, Walter rescued a dove from the beak of a falcon ; the bird was slightly wounded, and in the instinct of its terror flew into his very arms for protection ; its disappointed pursuer wheeled slowly round his head, and sailed at last majestically away. Not daring to present it as a gift, he ventured to implore her compassion for his *protégé*—a prayer at once accorded. A pang of jealous envy struck his heart as he beheld the gentle girl place the trembling flutterer on her breast, and cover it with kisses. That bird was the first tie between them.

From welcoming him with smiles the maiden soon began to receive him with blushes—to count the time which would elapse

before he should return ; and more than once her virgin dreams were of him. The presence of the abbess, or some member of the sisterhood, on the occasions of his visits, prevented more than the interchange of looks ; but these, to lovers, have ever been more eloquent than words ; and at last the enthusiastic, happy Walter felt convinced he was beloved, as though her lips confirmed the blest assurance.

Despite the vague feeling of childish terror which the Lady Mary retained of her guardian, it was almost with satisfaction she was informed that Wolsey had consented to her being withdrawn from the convent, and placed under his protection. Henry himself had recommended it. The crafty knight had secured the friendship of the brother of the rising favourite, Anne Boleyn ; and the cardinal, all-powerful as he was, deemed it imprudent to oppose it ; added to which, he had nothing but surmise and vague objection to offer—so artfully had Sir John contrived to keep down all suspicion.

It was not till the heiress reached her own halls of Stanfield that the secretary found occasion to breathe the tale his glances had so often told, or that he received in words the blest assurance that he was beloved. Trained in the simplicity of conventual life, Mary was ignorant of the coquetry of her sex—the thousand little arts by which they enhance the value of their smiles. In the frankness and truthfulness of her heart, she confessed their passion to be mutual ; and although her cheek burnt at the confession, it was with a blush as pure as infant joy's or virgin modesty's.

Amongst the first to welcome our heroine on her arrival at Stanfield was our old friend Steadman, who, on the death of her mother, had settled at Norwich, where he introduced the Flemish manner of wool-combing, which he had acquired in the Low Countries, and drove a profitable trade. Our readers may imagine the delight with which this faithful servitor beheld the child of his loved master, from whom he had so long been separated. With almost a father's fondness, he admired her graceful form and ripening beauties, and prayed that her fate might be happier than her parents'. Indeed, nothing but this species of devotion to the memory of the past, so common in the servitors of the olden time, could have induced the blunt old soldier to have remained a single instant under the same roof with Sir John de Corbey, whom he looked upon, with reason, as the cause of the mysterious disappearance of his nephew, the unfortunate Cuthbert, the armourer ; whose murder, he used to say, Heaven would, in its own good time, both discover and avenge. Maud, his widowed sister, whose wits had been unsettled ever since the loss of her only son, resided with him. Like her brother, she too was impressed with the fixed idea that Sir John was the assassin of her boy ; and although

gentle as a child at all other times, the sight of the man she hated, or the mere mention of his name, excited her fury; and she would fall upon her knees, and curse him as only a mother's broken heart could curse.

For a month after the return of Lady Mary to her paternal halls there was nothing but a succession of feasts and mirth. The only drawback to her happiness was the persevering boyish passion of her cousin, Henry de Corbey. Young as he was, his heart had long pined for something to cling to. The graceful girl appeared to him like a sunbeam in his path. She was the realisation of his dreams—a thing to love, to serve, and worship. Did she wander on the terrace, he was by her side—in the silent nook of the forest, he was at her feet, pleading his suit with an eloquence and grace which nearly drove poor Walter mad with jealousy, but which, with woman's tact, the orphan playfully turned aside as the light language of chivalry and romance—meeting his burning vows with smiles and jests. As a brother, she could have loved him for his generous qualities, his daring spirit, and his open heart—his scorn of all things mean and earthly. Perhaps, had not her heart been won—boy though he was—he might have gained an interest in time: some boys are dangerous.

But soon a more serious cause of apprehension clouded her clear brow.

Despite the disparity of years between them, Sir John de Corbey became a candidate for the maiden's hand; not from love—for his heart had long been dead to every passion but ambition—but as the means of securing those possessions for which already he had so deeply sinned. Although his ward tremblingly declined his offer, it was evident to all that he still retained his pretensions; and, like the patient bloodhound which never quits its track, persevered in attentions which, he trusted, would in time weary the unprotected girl into consent.

The intentions of her guardian at last became so apparent that it was commented upon in the household—several of the old retainers of which, as well as the chaplain, were indignant at the attempt to profit by the friendless condition of their young mistress, to weary her with a match so unsuited to her years and inclination.

"Were our young lord," observed the steward, "about five years older, the lady might do worse than to choose him. He hath a noble spirit and a generous heart."

Had the speaker known how keen a pang his words inflicted upon the unhappy Walter, who sat listening on thorns to the discussion, he would have pitied him. Despite the secretary's efforts at self-control, he could not forbid his cheek to flush or lip to quiver; and his confusion was still further increased by the observation of Adam, who was seated in a nook of the old hall, apparently poring over the quaintly illuminated page of a rich

manuscript, but in reality watching him with furtive glances. The leech suspected him.

"For my part" observed the seneschal, "I never thought Sir John possessed a heart to love aught but himself. What can be his motive for persevering in a suit distasteful to his ward, dishonouring to his years?"

"Necessity!" exclaimed Bertha, the attached female attendant of the heiress; "a rich wife to mend a poor fortune."

"Necessity!" repeated the chaplain, impatiently; "a mean excuse for a still meaner action. Let him amend his ruinous style of living—he else must leave his brave son a lean inheritance."

"Right, right," chimed in Adam, with his usual quiet tone; "retrenchment, by all means. Half his retinue he might well dismiss, part with his steward and his servitors; a chaplain, too," he added, with a peculiar smile, "in such a household, were superfluous."

The merry laugh which followed the last observation roused the temper of the priest, between whom and the speaker a species of silent warfare had long waged. The churchman, with the instinct of his profession and natural piety of his heart, hated the sceptic and the mediciner; the leech despised the unlettered chaplain. Strange that between science and religion the seeds of enmity ever should be springing.

"Out on thee, heretic!" retorted the worthy man. "Wouldst have a knight of worship like Sir John dine with his meat unblest?"

"The expense, father," continued the leech, unmoved by the opprobrious epithet the former had bestowed upon him, "consider the expense; four-score marks a year and dainty living—something too much, methinks, for mumbling homilies and doggrel Latin."

The question of Latinity was a sore subject between them; the man of science treating the churchman's monkish learning with most superb disdain: indeed, the latter had so frequently been wounded in the contest, that he prudently avoided the subject, and took refuge in the religious side of the question, where the cynic was compelled, in words at least, to be respectful; for the persecution against the Lollards was raging at its height.

"Out, heretic!" exclaimed the chaplain with a look of horror. "Rail at the Holy Mass! Beware! the Church's arm can punish."

Several of his hearers, to prove their orthodoxy, piously crossed themselves; and even Adam feared that he had gone too far.

"You wrong me, father, with a forced construction," he replied. "I spoke not of thy doctrines, but Latinity; in which, as Holy Church claims no infallibility, I, or any other man, may call thy skill in question. Heaven forefend I should attack thy faith," added the speaker with an affectation of humility; "it is a thing

too sublimated for human reason to analyse,—at least a reason weak as mine.”

“Thy words,” said the ecclesiastic gravely, and not altogether displeased at his antagonist withdrawing from a position where he was master, “deceives not me ; no, nor thy feigned humility : thou hast deeply studied.”

“Not much—not much,” said the leech musingly. “Sometimes before my eyes dreams of far distant lands will rise—of marble palaces—of gilded domes, which in my youth I saw, or fancied so—of shrines where science was the goddess worshipped—of silent temples, whose eternal walls breathe the deep spirit of the painter’s art.”

“You speak of Italy,” exclaimed Walter, deeply interested in his words ; for it was not often that the cold and reserved Adam could be brought to dwell upon the subject of his country, or the events of his early years.

“Ay, of Italia,” continued the old man mournfully ; “of that land where art and nature, like two rivals, strive in generous emulation. I have stood within her temples—breathed her balmy air—gazed enrapt upon her sculptured treasures, till the soul hath e’en been drunk with beauty ; but still found her choicest statues in her living forms.”

As if ashamed of the weakness and garrulity he had displayed, the leech closed the illuminated page over which he had been poring, and slowly quitted the hall. His departure was the signal for breaking up the conversation. The worthy chaplain retired to his devotions—or his bottle ; for he was not of those who despise the creature comforts of existence. Bertha, to attend her lady in her usual walk ; and the amorous secretary, as the poet quaintly expresses it, “to chew the cud of sweet and bitter fancies,” or to watch patiently but for one glance from the blue eyes he loved. Despite his confidence in Mary’s faith, and the hopefulness so natural to youth, his heart was ill at ease. The persevering suit of the knight aroused his fears, and the boyish love of the son his jealousy ; for he could not avoid feeling there was something in the gallant bearing of the noble, generous boy to touch a woman’s heart. He had not been long ensconced within his favourite bower upon the old terrace-walk of Stanfield, before his mistress and her attendant, followed by the passionate, loving Henry, approached ; and he was compelled to remain the concealed spectator of a scene which wrung his heart and awoke his admiration.

“But one poor kiss, sweet coz,” exclaimed the youth ; “grant it as you would alms to a beggar’s importunity ; if not from charity, from weariness. They deal in fable,” he added, “who assert that Heaven is won by prayers ; I find it deaf to me.”

“For shame, rude boy !” answered his cousin, half-playfully,

half-petulantly, determined not to treat his suit as serious. "A kiss!—your beard would frighten me."

"Manhood lies not always in the beard," replied the youth quickly. "In hawking for a husband, Mary, cast not your bird that way, lest you should find the quarry struck more precious in the plumage than the substance. You call me boy; methinks 'tis time you treat me like a man, since you deny me the boy's privilege—a cousin's kiss."

"Why, Henry," said the unhappy girl, "why follow my sad steps to pour a tale whose mirth is sadness to me?"

"Why do I follow thee?" repeated the amorous boy, fixing on her a look, and blushing at his own boldness. "Because I love thee! Thou hast a pearly skin, and a red lip, whose pouting blush invites a thousand kisses; a figure whose light grace haunts me in my dreams. But 'tis not these," he added; "'tis thy mind, seen through the glorious veil of these its outward graces. Let me be sworn thy knight."

"What!" exclaimed Bertha, who in her own heart would have preferred the handsome boy to twenty secretaries; "wouldst rival thine own father?"

Henry de Corbey started, and, perhaps for the first time in his life, his cheek turned pale. An idea so preposterous as a marriage between his cousin and his father never once struck him. From delicacy, Mary had concealed her guardian's tyranny from his son, whom, despite his importunities, she loved with a sister's love. The proud and generous boy spurned at the thought of such a sacrifice.

"Rival my father!" he repeated gravely. "Maiden, this is some ill-timed jest."

"My lady finds it none," answered the attendant petulantly; "for the knight woos not with smiles, but threats."

"Threats!" said Henry, his eyes flashing with indignation; "who dares accuse my father of dishonour? This is some loose talk—the gossip of the hall, bred from invention and mere idleness. Mary," he added, throwing himself upon his knees and seizing her hand, "thy words are truth; thou hast a soul too pure to lend to falsehood even the sanction of a look: is this thing so?"

"It is," faltered the lovely girl, her neck and brow suffused with a thousand blushes. "Would I had been born a beggar!"

"What!" continued the youth, starting to his feet, "marry my father! Couple age with youth! Bid the dull stream of sluggish winter and of genial spring in the same current flow! Oh! never, never! Nature revolts at such an outrage. No, Mary, no! Thou shalt not change thy girlhood's smile into a stepdame's frown; the opening bud of love's first flower shall not wither on the icy breast of heartless age. Love whom thou wilt," he added

passionately, "my arm shall aid thy choice ; wed whom thou wilt, my breaking heart shall bless it."

Despite his resolution, and the manly tone in which he spoke, the effort was too much for him, and tears of mingled rage and grief chased each other down his burning cheeks. Vainly he endeavoured to dash them aside—vainly endeavoured to conceal them ; he was Nature's child, and had not yet acquired the art of smiling on the pangs which turned his heart to ashes, or bearing a calm front with the iron hand of shame upon his soul.

"You were right, Mary," he exclaimed, "quite right, to mock my childish suit. I prove myself a boy by these unmanly tears. Do not despise me for them ; I am not yet accustomed to dishonour."

"Thou art my own dear noble-hearted cousin !" replied Mary ; "and these tears honour thy manhood, not disprove it, Henry. Come, thou shalt be my friend—Heaven knows I need one—my knight, my brother."

"Brother !" repeated the youth with a sigh ; "well, be it so. I'll prove a brother to thee, watch over thy happiness like a miser over his most precious treasure, seeking contentment in the task, since I have lost my own."

The speaker sadly turned away to leave her.

"Whither goest thou ?" asked the Lady Mary.

"To my father !" replied the boy, with a degree of resolution beyond his years.

"What to do ?"

"To plead thy cause—to purge this foul dishonour from his heart," said her cousin ; "to bid him choose between this madness and his son, to show him in a mirror the monster he hath engendered in his brain, till he shall loathe and scorn it. Farewell, dear Mary ! Soon shall I see thee smile again, glad in the light of thine own heart, thine innocence and virtue. Doubt not my eloquence when 'tis for thee I plead."

The sad-hearted boy left her on his generous errand as he spoke. Scarcely had he left the terrace, than Walter, who had been an agitated spectator of the scene between the cousins, emerged from his concealment. He was too just not to appreciate the maiden's confidence and his young rival's worth. The agitated girl advanced to meet him ; placing her hand in his, she sobbed, as he knelt to press it to his lips :

"Walter, our dream of happiness is over. The evil fortune of my house prevails, and we must part."

"Part !" said her lover. "Dost thou, then, repent the love which blessed the humble secretary ?"

"Are these sad tears," replied the unhappy heiress, "the proofs of love estranged, or faith decayed ? But I am beset with snares, with terrors for thy safety ; my guardian——"

"Loves thee," added Walter, finishing the words her lips refused to speak.

"Call it not love!" exclaimed his mistress; "profane not the pure flame. Base avarice is the shrine at which he worships—to restore the fallen greatness of his house his fixed ambition, and I the sacrifice. By lingering here thou wilt but pull destruction on thy head, yet fail to rescue me. Too well thou knowest," she continued, "his stern, unbending nature. Alone I have the heart to brave the storm, yet not to share it with thee. Fly, then, at once; for oh! I see no haven for our fears—no power to save me from the last despair."

"Yes; Wolsey's," replied her lover; "he whose all-powerful arm shielded thy infant years from thy false guardian's tyranny."

"Wolsey's!" repeated the maiden; "he hath abandoned me. What chance—what hope to interest him in my fortunes?"

"Listen," said Walter; "when boys, my father and the cardinal were friends—sworn confidants in study, pleasure, mischief. Some childish words divided them. One morn, when walking on the banks of the swift Orwell, which skirts their native city, my father's ears were struck by the faint cry of a spent swimmer. His jerkin doffed, he plunged into the stream, and bore the half-drowned soul to shore. 'Twas his quondam friend."

"Did he not, in his greatness, remember the preserver of his life?" demanded Mary.

"The great have treacherous memories," resumed the youth. "Ere my father died, he left a letter for his grace, begging protection for his orphan son; I have it still."

"Why didst thou not present it?"

"Dost thou ask why?" said the secretary, gazing upon her with earnest tenderness. "What was to me the chance of earthly favour—of buzzing, like some hapless moth, around the lamp of greatness, to perish at last, perchance, within its blaze—if it removed me from thy presence, lady?"

Mary would never have known the sacrifice of which her lover spoke so slightly, but for the hope he entertained that it might not yet be too late to use the letter as a means of saving her. Generous herself, she had never considered the inequalities of their fortune; and if for a moment she remembered her high lineage and broad lands, it was to wish them ten times greater, to bestow them on the man she loved. Hers was a heart which in the fulness of its love, could all bestow, without vaunting, like a churl, the value of the gift; and yet she felt the sacrifice of Walter, so apt is sensibility to weigh the merit in another it sees not in itself.

"Didst thou for me resign the hope of life—the step which leads to greatness?" she exclaimed; "my weakness must not shame thy noble nature. Let the storm rage, it still shall find me

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
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
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